



# CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES IN ADDRESSING RURAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

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Stakeholder Focus  
Group Findings

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## Disclaimer

The points of view, analyses, interpretations, and opinions expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of NN4Y.

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# ABSTRACT

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While youth homelessness is prevalent at similar rates in both rural and urban areas, it is less visible and less studied in rural regions. Many rural areas lack resources to provide services to young people experiencing homelessness, so youth often have to move or travel great distances to find the youth-oriented services and supports they need. This qualitative study aims to better understand the unique challenges faced by rural communities in the U.S. to address youth homelessness. It also examines the ways they are responding to those challenges and opportunities to strengthen service delivery models in rural contexts. We conducted seven 90-minute virtual focus groups with 45 national, state, regional, local, Tribal, and young adult stakeholders. Five of these focus groups focused on five specific rural regions, which vary in their geography, youth homelessness services, and demographics. Two researchers analyzed transcripts by developing a coding scheme and creating focus group-by-code matrices for key topics to reveal patterns.

Stakeholders described how the invisibility of rural homelessness, lack of awareness, stigma and distrust of public systems led rural regions to undercount young people in need of support. While rural schools are a strategic place to identify youth and raise awareness about youth homelessness, young people reported that when they first needed support they were not aware of the existence of federally-required school-based youth homelessness liaisons. Most rural regions reported having insufficient resources, pushing young people underground to rely on their social networks for informal supports. Focus groups discussed how the individuals providing and receiving these supports were looking for guidance to improve these informal arrangements. Youth reported experiencing racism from rural public systems, and two regions indicated they lacked data to measure disparities. Stakeholders from Tribal nations and marginalized communities indicated they lacked funding to develop strategies for addressing youth homelessness. All types of participants also reported that rural LGBTQIA youth lack access to affirming services. While agencies face several barriers to cross-system collaboration, two regions highlighted how receiving funding at the community level helped facilitate new partnerships. While regions have made some efforts to seek youth input, they have encountered geographic, technological, and funding barriers to authentic youth collaboration. These findings inform a series of recommendations we offer for better addressing rural youth homelessness in the U.S.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Background & Motivation

Chapin Hall's previous research brief, [Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in Rural America](#), found that both urban and rural areas share similar rates of youth homelessness. Despite this similar prevalence, there have been fewer studies about rural youth homelessness, and the problem is less visible. Rural youth are more likely to rely on temporary informal

housing arrangements with members of their social networks than to use formal shelters. Even unsheltered forms of homelessness, like sleeping in a car, in an abandoned building, or outside, are more dispersed and hidden in rural communities. Many rural areas lack resources to provide services to young people experiencing homelessness, so youth often have to move or travel great distances to find the youth-oriented services and supports they need. We also lack evidence about which types of services and supports are most effective in rural contexts.

This qualitative study aims to better understand the unique challenges that rural communities in the U.S. face in addressing youth homelessness, the ways they are responding to those challenges, and opportunities to strengthen service delivery models in rural contexts. This work is funded through a contract with the National Network for Youth (NN4Y), which will be using the results to inform the design of a pilot initiative for addressing rural youth homelessness.

## Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions about serving **youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness in rural areas with varying levels of services and supports**:

1. What are the barriers to identifying youth? What strategies are being used and how could they be improved?
2. What are the challenges to serving youth? What strategies are being used, and how could they be improved?
3. In what ways do current systems and services mitigate or perpetuate existing inequities and exclusion? What strategies are stakeholders using to promote equity and inclusion and how could those strategies be improved?
4. What are the barriers to collaboration across different types of stakeholders, including young people with lived experience of homelessness? What strategies are being used and how could they be improved?

## Method

This study included seven 90-minute virtual focus groups:

- one focus group with national and state rural stakeholders working to address rural youth homelessness;
- one focus group with young adults with lived experience with rural youth homelessness; and
- five focus groups with stakeholders from five different rural regions in the U.S., representing a range of nonprofits and government agencies that engage with rural youth experiencing homelessness in regions with varying levels of services and supports.

In total, 45 individuals participated, including national ( $n = 3$ ), state ( $n = 9$ ), multicounty ( $n = 15$ ), local ( $n = 8$ ), Tribal ( $n = 2$ ), and young adult ( $n = 8$ ) stakeholders. Two researchers developed a

coding scheme and analyzed transcripts by creating focus group by code matrices for key topics to reveal patterns.

**Table 1. Findings and Recommendations**

## Findings

## Recommendations

### Identifying Youth at Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness

**Stakeholders described how the invisibility of rural homelessness, lack of community awareness, stigma, and distrust of public systems led them to undercount young people in need of support.** They noted that point-in-time (PIT) counts and education data on homelessness miss many youth experiencing homelessness.

➤ **Support the use of alternative methods to more accurately estimate rural youth homelessness populations.** Creative approaches could include refining and supplementing current methods by engaging public systems and community-based organizations, and by employing universal screening, administrative data linkages, and representative surveys.

**While rural schools are a strategic place to identify youth and raise awareness, young people were not initially aware they had school-based homelessness liaisons.** Stakeholders highlighted the importance of increasing the capacity of federally required homelessness liaisons to educate rural communities about youth homelessness and build relationships.

➤ **Increase the capacity of rural schools to identify youth and raise awareness by funding trainings and devoting additional staff time to youth homelessness.** Train superintendents, school leaders, homelessness liaisons, counselors, teachers, and other staff to learn more about the issue, raise community awareness, and build trusting relationships with youth over time.

### Providing Services and Supports

**Most rural areas reported having insufficient resources for providing services and supports to youth dispersed across vast regions.** Stakeholders highlighted transportation and technology barriers to serving rural youth. They reported a shortage of housing programs and resources, mental health and addictions services, and safe spaces where youth could congregate and access support navigating systems and career and youth development opportunities.

➤ **Provide all communities with flexible funding to ensure that youth in every part of the country have access to coordinated services and supports.** Take into account the higher cost-per-youth in rural areas and allow spending on transportation and technology.

**Rural youth are more likely to draw on informal supports and are looking for guidance to better these arrangements.** Stakeholders reported that many of the people both providing and receiving informal supports were concerned about the legality of these arrangements and looking for guidance to help increase stability and safety.

➤ **Support the development and evaluation of innovative programs for supporting rural youth.** Rigorous evaluations will build an evidence base about the most effective models for addressing youth homelessness in rural areas.

➤ **Formalize supports by passing new state laws and providing youth with resources and legal guidance.** Allow unaccompanied minors to consent to their own shelter to avoid pushing youth underground. Additionally, provide resources and legal guidance to help youth and their supporters engage in safe, legal, and supportive relationships.



**Table 1. Findings and Recommendations, Continued**

Findings	Recommendations
<p><b>Equity &amp; Inclusion</b></p> <p><b>Youth reported experiencing racism from rural public systems and two regions indicated they lacked data to measure disparities.</b> Young adults discussed the criminalization of homelessness for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)—particularly by rural law enforcement, education, and child welfare systems.</p>	<p><b>Explicitly fund strategies to dismantle systemic racism in rural public systems and nonprofits and better measure equity and inclusion.</b> Strategies could include changing laws and policies, increasing the presence of youth homelessness services and supports, and training child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and law enforcement staff.</p>
<p><b>Stakeholders from Tribal nations and marginalized communities reported lacking funding to develop strategies for addressing youth and family homelessness.</b> National stakeholders also emphasized the importance of including Tribal stakeholders in their conversations on youth homelessness.</p>	<p><b>Fund the participation of Tribal nations and marginalized communities in conversations about rural youth homelessness.</b> Ensuring the ability of marginalized communities to participate will require explicit efforts to ensure their inclusion, such as funding participation.</p>
<p><b>Rural youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) lack access to affirming services and supports.</b> Stakeholders noted this is especially the case for transgender youth in particular. Strategies they highlighted included expanding urban LGBTQIA organizations to serve or connect with youth in rural areas and providing well-vetted, affirming host homes and affordable housing units. Young adults also emphasized the importance of providing affirming school-based mental health services.</p>	<p><b>Fund LGBTQIA-affirming housing programs, mental health services, and flexible supports in rural areas and connect youth to broader LGBTQIA communities.</b> Flexible solutions like direct cash transfers could empower LGBTQIA youth to access their own solutions where they feel most safe. Urban LGBTQIA organizations could also reach out to support youth in rural areas.</p>

**Table 1. Findings and Recommendations, Continued**

**Findings**

**Recommendations**

**Collaboration**

**Stakeholders discussed several barriers to cross-system collaboration, but also noted that receiving funding at the community level facilitated new partnerships.** The barriers that stakeholders discussed included lack of resources, high turnover, agencies not understanding how their actions complement or impede each other, differences between the McKinney-Vento Education and HUD definitions of homelessness, data sharing challenges, and lack of trust.

**While regions have made some efforts to seek youth input, they encountered geographic, technological, and funding barriers to authentic youth collaboration.** Stakeholders also raised concerns about the tokenization of youth and the exclusion of youth from the most marginalized communities.

➤ **Target funding to communities, as opposed to individual agencies, to support the development of community-driven collaborative approaches.** Community-level funding helps stakeholders align agendas across multiple systems, establish relationships, and develop structured cross-system referral and identification processes. Building a national learning community could also help rural regions support each other.

➤ **Require and provide explicit funding and effective technical assistance to develop rural youth action boards (YABs) with meaningful roles and influence and ensure rural areas are represented on regional and state YABs.** Funding should cover the staffing to establish and maintain YABs and to pay youth. It should also cover rural technological and transportation needs.

# INTRODUCTION

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This qualitative study aims to better understand the unique challenges that rural communities in the U.S. face in addressing youth homelessness, the ways they are responding to those challenges, and opportunities to strengthen service delivery models in rural contexts. This work was possible thanks to the support of Oak Foundation through a contract with the National Network for Youth (NN4Y). NN4Y will be using the results to inform the design of a pilot initiative for addressing rural youth homelessness.

We begin with a summary of the literature on rural youth homelessness and the research questions driving this study. Next, we describe the study design and our approach to data collection and analysis. Then we present the findings organized by the research questions. We conclude the report with a discussion of the implications of our findings, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

## Background Literature

A previous Chapin Hall groundbreaking brief, [Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in Rural America](#), found that youth homelessness is prevalent at similar rates in both rural and urban areas (Morton et al., 2018a; Morton et al., 2018b). However, the hidden nature of rural youth homelessness makes it far more challenging to identify young people experiencing homelessness in rural areas (Lukawiecki et al., 2018; Morton et al., 2018b). Factors that hide rural youth homelessness include stigma and reliance on informal support networks. Youth in rural counties are twice as likely to seek shelter with others and half as likely to be staying in shelters as youth in urban counties (Morton et al., 2018b). While relying on informal support networks as a survival strategy can be both unstable and dangerous, a recent study demonstrates that informal living arrangements with supportive adults can also be nurturing and safe (Curry et al., 2020). Some rural regions have recently started piloting strategies for formalizing these informal arrangements to reduce the associated risks. Host home programs, which match community members who have extra bedrooms with youth who need housing and provide youth with case management services, are one example of these strategies.

Many rural areas lack resources to provide accessible, comprehensive, youth-oriented, trauma-informed services, and youth in rural areas often have to relocate or travel great distances to find the services they need (Lukawiecki et al., 2018; Morton et al., 2018b). To make services more accessible, rural providers involve schools, offer mobile services and shuttles, and leverage text messaging and the internet (Jenkins & Amaral, 2017). Rural service providers offer shelter using a combination of motel vouchers, host home programs, scattered-site housing, tiny houses, shared housing, and rental assistance. (USICH, 2018; Lukawiecki, et al., 2018; FYSB, 2018). However, challenges remain, especially as youth experiencing homelessness in rural counties are more disconnected from education and employment than youth in urban counties (Morton, et al., 2018b).

Bringing different organizations and stakeholders together to leverage resources and align objectives is especially important in rural areas. However, building collaborative relationships

can be taxing for low-resourced, community-based organizations and over-burdened government agencies. To assist in building these relationships, some rural areas have benefited from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) grants. YHDP requires recipients to assemble an interdisciplinary team, representing regional providers, Continuums of Care, child welfare organizations, other agencies, and young people with lived experience of homelessness. Workgroups made up of stakeholders from different agencies work together to address youth homelessness and youth action boards (YABs) advise and contribute to decision making. However, rural YHDP teams have reported logistical challenges collaborating this deeply across expansive regions, as well as needing additional support to establish effective youth action boards (NCHE, no date).

Building an evidence base about which types of services and supports are most effective in rural contexts will require further innovation, collaboration, information sharing, and research (Morton et al., 2019). This qualitative study seeks to add to our knowledge about the perspectives of different types of stakeholders on the current strategies rural areas are employing to address youth homelessness, the challenges they are facing, and their ideas for better serving young people. More specifically, we explore rural strategies and challenges in the areas of service provision, identification of youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness, equity and inclusion, the collaboration of systems and service providers, and youth consultation.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the challenges to identifying youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness across rural communities? What strategies are being used to identify those youth?
2. What are the challenges to serving youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness across rural communities with varying levels of services and supports? What strategies are being used to serve those youth, and how could these strategies be improved?
3. In what ways do current systems and services perpetuate existing inequities and exclusion? What strategies are stakeholders using to promote equity and inclusion and how could these strategies be improved?
4. What are the challenges different types of stakeholders face in collaborating to address the needs of youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness in rural communities? What strategies are they using to facilitate collaboration and how could these strategies be improved?
5. What are the barriers to involving youth with lived experience in planning and decision making to address youth homelessness? What strategies are being used to collaborate with youth, and how could these strategies be improved?

# METHOD

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## Study Design

To assess the challenges rural areas face in addressing youth homelessness and the strategies that they are using to address those challenges, we completed seven virtual focus groups. One group included national and state stakeholders working to address rural youth homelessness. One group consisted of young adults with lived experience of rural youth homelessness. The remaining five groups were with stakeholders from five different rural regions in the U.S. The stakeholders represented systems and services that engage with youth experiencing homelessness.

In designing the study, we consulted with two of NN4Y's young leaders who have lived experience with rural homelessness. These young leaders suggested allowing young adult focus group participants to choose between participating in a regional stakeholder focus group, the young adult focus group, or both.

We used the videoconferencing program GoToMeeting to conduct and record each virtual 90-minute focus group, and gave participants the option to connect via an internet link or by calling in. At the start of each focus group, we completed a verbal informed consent process.

The study was approved by the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and Chapin Hall Institutional Review Board.

## National and State Stakeholders Focus Group

### National and State Stakeholder Recruitment

To identify national and state stakeholders, we worked with NN4Y to compile a list of stakeholders representing national and state government agencies, social service agencies, and nonprofit organizations focused on youth homelessness. We also reached out to racial justice organizations to share flyers and ask for assistance in recruitment. Once we compiled the list of potential participants, we reached out to them via email to inform them about the focus group, invite their participation, and to recruit additional stakeholders through snowball sampling.

### National and State Stakeholder Characteristics

Six individuals participated in our national and state stakeholders' focus group. These focus group participants represented two national nonprofit organizations ( $n = 2$ ), two nonprofit state agencies ( $n = 2$ ), the federal government ( $n = 1$ ), and a state government ( $n = 1$ ). The state-level stakeholders were from the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States.

## Regional Stakeholder Focus Groups

To identify stakeholders to participate in the five regional focus groups, we first selected the rural areas to include in the study. After determining which regions to include, we invited regional stakeholders to participate and facilitated a virtual focus group for each region.

## Region Selection

We set out to obtain a purposive sample of rural regions that would vary by geography, federal funding for addressing youth homelessness, and racial composition. We used the YHDP Round 3 definition of *rural*, which specifies that a region is rural if the population is “more rural than suburban or urban,” (HUD, 2018, p. 4). This allowed us to use the [FY2018 YHDP Rural Area Worksheet](#) to determine eligibility for a specific county or set of counties.

We used the U.S. Census classifications of U.S. regions to select at least two rural areas in different regions that received Round 1 or Round 2 YHDP funding and three rural areas in different regions that did not receive YHDP funding.

We also wanted to select rural areas that included communities that are predominantly Black or Native American, because Black and Native American youth experience homelessness at strikingly disproportionate rates (Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017; Morton, Chavez, & Moore, 2019). To identify these areas, we used a map of rural “majority-minority” U.S. Census tracts produced by the Housing Assistance Council with data from the 2010 Census and American Community Survey, which shows the U.S. population of rural areas and small towns to be 78% White (non-Hispanic), 9% Hispanic, 8% Black, 2% Native American, 2% multiracial, and 1% Asian (HAC, 2012).

We followed a two-step process to select five rural areas that met all of the above criteria:

1. We reviewed the list of rural areas that received Round 1 or Round 2 YHDP funding, grouped them by U.S. Census region (Northeast, South, Midwest, or West), and randomly selected two areas from this list, one in the Midwest and one in the West.
2. We then reached out to individuals in our networks to identify stakeholders in three rural areas that met our criteria who would be willing to help recruit more stakeholders and young people. Through this process, we reached out to stakeholders in six areas and were ultimately successful in recruiting stakeholders in three of these areas. Table 2 displays the characteristics of the final set of rural areas where we completed virtual focus groups.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Selected Regions**

YHDP R1/R2	U.S. Census Region	Contains rural and small town census tracts that are predominantly	
		Black	Native American
Region 1	Northeast		
Region 2	West		✓
Region 3	South	✓	
Region 4	West		✓
Region 5	Midwest		

**Table 3. Characteristics of Regional Stakeholders (N = 31)**

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Sector</b>		
Youth homelessness	9	29
Education (K–12)	8	26
Housing & homelessness	4	13
Mental health	4	13
Juvenile justice	3	10
Child welfare	2	6
Higher education	1	3
<b>Jurisdiction</b>		
Multicounty	15	48
State	6	19
County/District	8	26
Tribal nation	2	6

### Regional Stakeholder Recruitment

In each region, we asked our primary contact to identify a list of stakeholders whom we could invite to participate, including individuals working for runaway and homeless youth programs, Continuum of Care homelessness services, primary, secondary and postsecondary educational institutions, after-school programs, child welfare and juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement, and other community-based and faith-based organizations. We invited stakeholders working at the state, multicounty, and county/district levels, as well as those working for Tribal nations.

### Regional Stakeholder Characteristics

Table 3 displays fields represented by the 31 stakeholders who participated in the regional focus groups. Just over half of these participants were working in youth homelessness and K–12 education. Another quarter were working in housing and homelessness or mental health agencies.

## Young Adult Stakeholders

### Young Adult Stakeholder Recruitment

We worked with the regional stakeholders we identified to recruit young adults (ages 18–25) with lived experience of homelessness. These stakeholders reached out to young adults to ask their permission to share their contact information with us and then we reached out directly via email, phone call, or text message to explain the study and invite them to participate. We offered participating young adults \$25 in appreciation of their time, which we sent either electronically or via mail depending on their preference.

### Young Adult Stakeholder Characteristics

In total, eight young adults participated in our focus groups. Seven participated in regional focus groups and three participated in the young adult focus group. This includes two young adults who participated in both a regional focus group and the young adult focus group.

Table 4 shows the characteristics of the young adults who participated in our focus groups. We collected the majority of this information through a brief demographic survey that was administered online immediately following each focus group. However, since only five young adults completed the survey, the numbers in this table are also supplemented by demographic information that participants disclosed during the focus groups.

Young adult participants ranged in age from 18 to 26, with a median age of 19. They reported first experiencing homelessness at ages ranging from 3 to 16. The median age for first experiencing homelessness was 11 years old. The amount of time youth reported not having a safe or stable place to stay ranged from 6 months to 13 years, with a median length of 1 year.

### Data Analysis

All focus groups were audio recorded and auto-transcribed using GoToMeeting. Immediately following each focus group, the research team carefully reviewed each transcript for accuracy and removed any identifiers. Two members of the research team worked together to develop an initial *a priori* codebook based on the key topic areas of the focus group protocols and research questions. Then the two coders reviewed three different sections of three different transcripts and applied the predetermined codes. They also did open coding to catch any emerging themes. The coders met to compare their coding of these transcripts and revised the codebook accordingly, by adding new codes and refining code definitions. We then imported the codebook and all seven transcripts into Atlas.ti, where we double-coded one transcript and a single coder finished coding the remaining six. We exported the output to Excel workbooks, where we constructed focus group by code matrices for key topics (i.e., service delivery, identification, equity and inclusion, collaboration, and youth collaboration) to identify patterns across focus groups.

**Table 4. Characteristics of Young Adult Participants (N = 8)**

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
White	3
Multiracial	2
Black	1
Native American	1
Missing	1
<b>Gender Identity</b>	
Female	5
Male	2
Missing	1
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
Heterosexual	3
Bisexual	2
Don't know	1
Missing	2
<b>Parenting Status</b>	
Not a parent	4
Parent	1
Missing	3
<b>High School Diploma/GED</b>	
Yes	4
No	1
Missing	3



# FINDINGS

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## Identifying Youth at Risk for or Experiencing Homelessness

- Stakeholders reported that their regions were severely **undercounting** the number of youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas.
- They reported barriers to identification, including the **hidden nature** of rural homelessness, **lack of community awareness about youth homelessness**, and **concerns about the consequences of identifying as homeless**, including stigma and distrust of public systems.
- Focus group participants highlighted the important role of **schools** in identifying young people at risk for and experiencing homelessness.
- However, participating young adults reported they were not aware they had federally required school-based **homelessness liaisons** when they first needed support.
- To address these challenges, stakeholders discussed strategies for increasing the capacity of rural schools to identify youth in need of support.

In the U.S., determining the number of young people who are experiencing homelessness in a particular area is essential for providing resources and assessing how well the population is served. However, determining the number of young people experiencing homelessness in rural areas is especially challenging.

### **Stakeholders reported that traditional point-in-time (PIT) counts and school data on youth homelessness severely undercount youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas.**

For example, a state stakeholder highlighted this issue by comparing administrative education data to survey data, saying, “If you look at the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey] we have a homeless question on there, and those numbers are significantly higher than what our [local education agencies] are reporting across the state.” In another area, a regional stakeholder explained that they compared their education records on youth homelessness to the prevalence they would expect based on national estimates, saying, “We know that nationally, if you have students that are eligible for free meals that about 10% of that population on a national level would be typically at risk or possibly experiencing homelessness. . . most of our districts were flagged as underreporting.” Alternatives to traditional PIT counts that communities were trying included a service-based PIT count in an YHDP region and a youth-focused count using a broad definition of homelessness in another region, although the COVID-19 pandemic has been a barrier to completing these counts.

### **Lack of Awareness**

**Stakeholders from different regions described several reasons that members of rural communities fail to see they have a problem with youth homelessness.** The most commonly mentioned reasons were the hidden nature of rural youth homelessness, lack of understanding about how homelessness looks for youth, and the lack of resources to help youth who have been identified. Stakeholders noted that rural areas are also influenced by conservative political

beliefs about who is deserving of public assistance. A state stakeholder highlighted this lack of awareness in rural areas:

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*I think we still have a lot of challenge, particularly in small, rural communities, with people who don't understand, like, what does it mean to be homeless. There's just that attitude of like, "Well, that kids just fighting with their parents, or that family's just a mess, and they've always been a mess." No. So, some of that. . . prevents people from really saying, "Yeah, that's actually homelessness." And that's not just a family that's a mess, that's not just a kid that's just having a disagreement with a parent, like this is the beginnings of, it's temporary homelessness maybe, but it's the beginning of what could be chronic homelessness as a young adult and into adulthood. (State stakeholder)*

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**Stakeholders reported that this lack of community understanding is exacerbated by having two different definitions for homelessness:** the McKinney-Vento education definition and the HUD definition. One state stakeholder explained, "Often even when I'm dealing with school administrators, they argue with me because they've heard the HUD definition, so they don't understand why we're saying couch surfing is also homelessness." A juvenile justice stakeholder also noted that probation officers typically do not consider couch surfing to count as homelessness since it is so common among the population they serve.

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*Homelessness is like normalized amongst the probation officers and other human service workers that I come in contact with. For instance, it's not uncommon for a decent percentage of our kids that are on probation, to be going from relative to relative, or friend to friend, and the probation officers just kinda follow them around, they don't really identify them as being homeless. And there are so many situations where the kid is homeless, and like everyone reiterating what everyone has said, the kid doesn't identify it, the family, if they're available doesn't identify it, the school, if they're in school, doesn't identify it. The probation officer and other workers don't identify it. (Regional stakeholder)*

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Young people also often lack information about definitions of homelessness, which can have serious implications for how long they go without needed supports. One young adult shared, "There's a lot of youth that I know, they didn't quite understand what it meant to be homeless, and in fact it took me a while to realize that I actually was qualified as homeless."

**According to national and state stakeholders, some rural communities are also in denial about the existence of youth homelessness due to their lack of resources to address it.**

If there are no available services or supports, there is no incentive for young people to disclose their situation or for service providers to identify youth experiencing homelessness. Illustrating this point, a state stakeholder shared:

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*I do think that because of the lack of services that also lends to a lack of identification, because people really don't want to open the Pandora's Box when they have no idea what to do with the young person when they are identified. So, I think that the idea of identifying kids is not necessarily something that is focused on in our rural communities because of the fact that if they identified them, they would then need to figure out what to do with them and there really isn't an appropriate response to that for them. (State stakeholder)*

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It can be easier to identify youth experiencing homelessness once a region has more services. One stakeholder from a YHDP region noted that after they expanded their youth homelessness services and made some progress towards building community awareness, they were better equipped to complete a more accurate service-based PIT count of youth.

### Youth and Family Concerns

Stakeholders described how youth and family concerns about identifying as homeless, including stigma and distrust of public systems, also make it more challenging to identify young people at risk for or experiencing homelessness. General distrust of public systems in rural communities leads to a “we take care of our own” perspective, where community members rely more on leaning on informal support networks than on formal services.

**Stakeholders across all seven focus groups discussed how the stigma associated with homelessness makes it more challenging to identify youth in rural areas.** They highlighted how stigma is even more of an issue in rural areas than it is in cities due to the lack of anonymity and normalization of couch surfing and substandard housing. For example, a regional stakeholder shared, “I’m working with the rural school district where everybody knows everybody, everybody’s kind of related to everybody. It’s different than identifying these families and saying they’re experiencing homelessness, because now you are maybe they have relatives that are living this way, you’re taking on some personal stigma.”

Young adults described how stigma affects the ability of young people to recognize and to disclose that they are experiencing housing instability. A young person explained, “A lot of people specifically at my school are too afraid to say anything just because of that stigma that is surrounded by homelessness.” Another young adult acknowledged that this stigma can also prevent youth from recognizing their own homelessness:

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*The biggest challenge of getting youth to the right resources, comes with like, like we're saying right now, is the stigma that goes along with that. I know when I was a kid, even though I was like, deep in the shit, and I was having such a hard time with my life because of homelessness and just bouncing from couch to couch. You know, even though I was dealing with all this hardship, it took such an effort to like realize that I was indeed homeless and that, you know, I did indeed need help. (Young adult stakeholder)*

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Other young adults explained how this stigma affects youth in their communities, noting that youth who appear to be homeless are treated with less respect, denied rights, not listened to, susceptible to physical attacks, and targets of police harassment. Stakeholders discussed several strategies for addressing young people's hesitation to disclose their housing instability due to stigma. These included community education around youth homelessness and offering services and supports to all youth regardless of what they have shared about themselves. For example, a young person explained that the homeless liaison at her school would put out supplies to both help youth meet their basic needs every week and build trusting relationships with youth, so that they could take what they needed without having to disclose their situation.

**Stakeholders also reported that youth are often afraid of the consequences of coming forward to identify as homeless due to distrust of public systems.** All types of stakeholders from all the focus groups discussed how the fears that young people have regarding involvement with child protective services (CPS) or placement in residential facilities can keep them from seeking help. One young person explained how his mother would instruct him not to talk to CPS. He said, "The CPS was involved in my life on several different occasions. My mom would purposely be like, 'These people are bad. Don't talk to them. Don't tell anybody anything. . . they're going to take you.'" Another young person expressed concerns about the way residential facilities treated youth and set them on a "pipeline to prison". These concerns were also shared by a juvenile justice stakeholder:

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*I think one of my biggest things is sometimes, when the youth is having problems at home, the home is unsafe, they can't stay there, the parents want them out, if we go the children's services route, my fear is that they're going to get warehoused in a residential facility because of their behaviors, and it's hard to behave in a residential facility when everybody has behavior issues. So, I would much rather work with [youth homelessness services], try to avoid that from happening. (Juvenile justice stakeholder)*

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A few stakeholders also noted that the individuals informally caring for youth experiencing homelessness share some of these same fears. For example, a regional stakeholder explained,

“So not maybe just the students, but also the families that may be hosting them or nobody wants to get in trouble with anybody else and so, you know, ‘Is that going to trigger a [CPS] call?’”

**Stakeholders reported that this distrust of public systems also leads many rural communities to lean on informal support networks instead of formal services.** This perspective also emphasizes supporting youth informally without labeling them as homeless or connecting them to formal services, due to distrust of government systems or a desire for privacy. For example, a state stakeholder explained, “I had a youth who was not identified as foster care or youth in homelessness. He was sleeping on park benches, then he also was couch surfing at the superintendent’s home, and I was like, ‘How did you not recognize that?’ And the comments are, ‘Well, we take care of our own.’”

### The Role of Rural Schools

Stakeholders identified schools as a strategic place to identify youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness. They highlighted the important role of school staff in building relationships with young people and educating the community about youth homelessness. However, none of the young adult stakeholders had initially been aware of the existence of federally required school-based homelessness liaisons when they first needed help. National and state stakeholders described ways that they were working to get rural schools to better recognize and fulfill their responsibilities for identifying youth experiencing homelessness.

**Young adults from three regions talked about how they first disclosed their housing instability to school counselors, coaches, and teachers with whom they had built strong relationships with over time.** A young person who attended five different high schools due to her housing instability explained that counselors at most of the schools she attended “were always busy” and she never opened up to them. She went on to describe how she finally disclosed her situation to a counselor at an alternative school, after they had developed a relationship, and she could tell that the counselor was not judgmental.

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*At the other schools, the public schools, I wasn’t really thinking of going to the counselors over there. I don’t know, I just didn’t really feel okay with talking and opening up to the other school counselors. But then, it was different when I went to this alternative school. It was something about her that made me willing to trust her because she’s dealt with all these other situations, she’s dealt with the kids who have to go to treatment, or drug use, or for their mental state, you know? So, she’s telling me that it’s okay to talk about it and stuff. She just made me feel comfortable being there first before she even asked me anything personal. Yeah, so I guess you could say we built up a bond before anything.*

(Young adult stakeholder)

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This young person also explained that talking with other students who were having similar experiences influenced her decision to finally open up. Other young adults and stakeholders also confirmed the importance of peer support and advice.

**Stakeholders also believed that schools were a strategic place to initiate further efforts to educate community members, families, and young people about youth homelessness.** For example, while regional stakeholders suggested putting flyers up in schools to inform youth about homelessness, a young person recommended visiting classrooms to explain the different definitions of homelessness and describe the types of services that are available to students:

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*The thing with students is that they don't really read flyers that are on the walls unless it's like a homecoming dance, or something like that. So what I found really helpful is that when I was doing one of my senior projects, I would like go around to classes and talk to them for about five minutes. Which—that would take a lot of time. But if the homeless liaison could get together a few people to go to different classes and just say, hey, this is what this looks like, or this is how this is, then it would just be a lot easier. And it would actually get to all of the students. (Young adult stakeholder)*

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**However, none of the eight young adults who participated in the focus groups had been aware that their school had a homeless liaison when they first needed assistance.** Even a student who reported opening up to a high school teacher about her situation still did not know her school had a homeless liaison until it was too late. The student said, "I didn't know schools even had homeless liaisons until after I graduated high school." Another young person from a different region explained that when she finally worked up the courage to disclose her situation at school, no one would listen to her. A host home coordinator reported that the students she served did not know they had a homelessness liaison at their school either. She explained what happened when she received referrals from community members, "But then whenever they, the youth would say they are still in school, I said, 'Well, did you know that there's a homeless liaison?' And of course they didn't know. And then whenever I would talk to the school, they didn't know that this youth was homeless."

**National and state stakeholders offered strategies to get rural schools to recognize their responsibilities.** Strategies they had employed, or suggested using in the future, included providing professional development to homeless liaisons and superintendents and using Title 1 funds to increase liaisons' hours or hire additional personnel to support their work. The following quote illustrates how a state administrator provided professional development on youth homelessness to help get schools to recognize their responsibilities:

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*For the last several years, I would do a survey asking how much time [liaisons were] devoting to the homeless education program and a couple of years in a*

*row, I got zero percent, so I had to go back and say, okay, you don't have any youth identify, there are still programmatic elements and then they got pushback from the superintendent. So then we had to broaden our professional development to the superintendents. (State stakeholder)*

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A couple of state stakeholders noted that through efforts like these over the last couple years, and through the issuance of new federal guidelines and monitoring from the U.S. Department of Education, their rural schools have started to better understand their legal responsibilities. There still seems to be a great deal of variation, with some liaisons engaged much more actively than others. For example, a young adult stakeholder praised her liaison, saying, "Once you kinda get on her list, she checks in with you like every 3 days just to make sure that everything's good. She's an amazing person."

### Providing Services and Supports

- Study participants reported that most rural areas have **insufficient resources** to support youth who are dispersed across vast regions. Key resource gaps included transportation and technology, housing programs and resources, mental health and addiction services, and safe spaces where youth can access systems navigation support along with education, career, and youth development opportunities.
- All focus groups discussed how rural youth relied on **informal supports**, which could be formalized and leveraged to better support youth and reduce associated risks and instability.

**All types of stakeholders explained that in most rural areas, the services and supports for youth at risk for or experiencing homelessness are insufficient.** However, the two regions that received YHDP funding also acknowledged how this funding has been "transformative" and led to a recent "explosion" of new services. Focus group participants noted that services are typically located in towns or small cities that serve large rural areas. They explained that youth from surrounding areas often have to travel great distances to reach services, and in many cases are forced to relocate to cities to access the supports they need.

**Programs serving rural areas reported needing resources to help youth access their services and stay connected through transportation and technology.** For example, one service provider explained, "We'll drive the distance if we need to. We would help set up whether that be paying for Uber or, you know, meeting halfway." Stakeholders also discussed a need to fund youth cell phones, tablets, or laptops to help them stay connected, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some rural areas also reported challenges with mobile service and internet access. As a national stakeholder pointed out, these additional expenses lead to a higher cost per youth for rural services compared to urban programs.

### Shelter & Housing

**Stakeholders highlighted that rural areas need an assortment of different types of youth-oriented housing programs for youth with different needs.** The sparsity of housing and shelter services was identified by every type of stakeholder in all but one region. Stakeholders

reported that housing services are generally lacking, and explained that the programs that did exist were rarely youth oriented and tended to separate families. They also described how the lack of state guidance and challenges with licensing made it especially difficult to serve unaccompanied minors. For example, staff from a housing program trying to serve this population explained:

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*Right now, the state is saying, you need to follow all of these rules. . . even though it's not realistic for us. We only have eight students here. We can't afford to do the things the big agencies do. The youth aren't in trouble. There isn't something wrong with them. . . . They were in an unlucky situation. . . any of the kids that the state can't help, we want to be there to like catch them before they fall, and if they're gonna make us follow the same rules as them, we can't catch, they're gonna fall from us then. So, yeah, just little things like they can't have hand towels, they can't use a bar of soap, all the cleaning supplies have to be locked up, we have to have a menu. It's a plethora of things like this. . . . It's more harmful than it is good. (Regional stakeholder)*

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Although only one of the regions participating in the study was already implementing a *host homes* program, study participants of every type and in all but one region recommended starting or expanding these programs to carefully match youth with appropriate hosts. Stakeholders from two regions also discussed their *rapid re-housing* programs, and both national and regional stakeholders mentioned HUD's Joint Transitional and Rapid Re-housing Program as a good fit for rural areas. Challenges associated with rapid rehousing included finding willing landlords and eligibility criteria which limit these programs to youth 18 and older who meet HUD's narrow definition of homelessness. The *transitional housing* programs that stakeholders discussed were often unavailable to minors due to state licensing laws. Focus group participants from areas with YHDP funding also emphasized the importance of *permanent supportive housing (PSH)*.

**Focus group participants from three regions also highlighted the lack of quality affordable housing that meets HUD's standards.** A young adult recommended the prioritization of building more affordable housing developments and suggested that they include a youth wing and a community resource center. A regional stakeholder suggested purchasing and rehabilitating old buildings to create apartments for youth. Focus group participants explained that obtaining affordable housing was especially challenging for young people with criminal records and young adults who do not qualify for developmental disability supports, but still need additional help.



## Community Services and Supports

Stakeholders also raised the need for mental health and addictions services, drop-in centers and wraparound services, career and youth development opportunities, and access to transportation and technology in rural areas.

**All seven focus groups raised the need for accessible mental health and substance use addiction services.** Stakeholders from a couple of focus groups discussed the challenge of recruiting and retaining mental health professionals in rural areas. Two young adults in particular stressed the importance of providing school-based mental health services, noting that these services had not been available in their high schools despite a great need. Focus group participants from a few regions also discussed the challenges associated with substance use addictions, which can lead to evictions and homelessness. These stakeholders stressed the need for multigenerational and family-oriented services, noting that many youth have parents who are struggling with addiction.

**Stakeholders from three regions stressed the need for more drop-in centers, with access to supports, such as assistance with systems navigation and wraparound services.** A regional stakeholder noted that some youth travel great distances from rural areas across the state to access a city drop-in center and then stay connected through social media. Two young adults from different regions recommended offering services that would benefit young people at risk for or experiencing homelessness in libraries, YMCAs, rec centers or other community organizations.

**All types of stakeholders emphasized the need to provide young people with career and youth development opportunities.** For example, a regional stakeholder and a young adult both suggested incorporating more life skills, budgeting, and job skills training into rural high schools and connecting youth with mentors. Stakeholders from two regions also raised the need for year-round dorms on community college campuses and other postsecondary institutions serving rural communities. Stakeholders distinguished between connecting youth with unreliable low-wage jobs and preparing youth for more stable careers and futures.

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*A lot of times the focus is almost immediately on housing plus employment and income, but without sufficient training or education to secure a living wage or employment there is this sort of continually on the cusp, in sort of a low wage, low security job, maybe no benefits. . . . Are we equipping young people just sort of for a short-term exit from homelessness, but sort of staying on the edge and dipping in and out, or are we thinking a little bit longer term. . . to equip them for sustainable exits from homelessness. (National stakeholder)*

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## Formalizing Informal Supports

**Young people in rural areas rely on their social networks to find the support they need.** All types of stakeholders from all participating regions reported that youth commonly *couch surfed*, which is a term we use in this report to describe moving from one temporary living arrangement

to another without a secure place to live. While stakeholders across the board shared similar stories of youth couch surfing, individuals from marginalized non-YHDP communities reported an especially high incidence of couch surfing in their networks. Focus group participants explained that youth would stay temporarily with relatives, friends, or teachers, and sometimes even strangers. For example, one stakeholder explained how the complete absence of services in some rural areas has pushed youth to the periphery of their social networks. The stakeholder said, "There's nowhere to refer them. So yeah, we do kind of look and say, do you know anyone who will let you sleep at their house? And the outcome of that is now, we have kids using social media and other very unsafe avenues to find housing. Because we can't help them." However, the lack of alternatives is not the only reason youth rely on informal networks. Some stakeholders pointed out that youth often prefer these types of arrangements over systems-involvement, especially when hosts are relatives, teachers, or friends.

**Stakeholders reported that many of the people providing informal supports to youth were looking for guidance about the right thing to do or how to find more resources.** Focus group participants shared concerns about liability and legality getting in the way of supporting youth. For example, a faculty member from a postsecondary education program explained since the university was concerned about liability, faculty and staff could not be open about the fact that they were informally supporting youth on their campus. Similarly, a young adult whose high school teacher had helped connect her with resources expressed that it should be easier for teachers to support youth struggling with housing instability without having to worry about getting in trouble.

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*I feel like if there was a way for [teachers] to legally get more involved without them getting in trouble or having like, people look down upon them because they're helping these students then that would be a great help. . . . And a lot of kids would be off the street if their closest teacher, who they look at as parent, could just take them in without being fired or reprimanded by the school district.  
(Young adult stakeholder)*

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Additionally, a stakeholder from a Tribal nation said that her children always had friends who were looking for a place to stay and explained, "I have a hard time, knowing which way to go, but, there isn't. . . I don't know of any direction on our reservation, on what we do, how we should be addressing it. Should people intervene?"

**Stakeholders also discussed how implementing strategies to formalize and leverage these informal relationships could lead to safer and more supportive living arrangements.** These strategies included rewriting state laws, as well as utilizing homeless liaisons, homelessness prevention funding, and host home programs. For example, a state stakeholder explained that they had introduced a no-cost bill to allow youth age 16 and older to consent to their own shelter. Other stakeholders emphasized the importance of having an active homeless liaison to build relationships and raise awareness about youth homelessness so that both young people and the individuals supporting them know who to turn to for help and resources.

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*And oftentimes, [youth] want to work within their own, in within their own informal networks and resources. And what they're looking for from the providers is really help in doing that safely and well, and accessing the other resources that providers can help them with. And that really, I think, even more than in urban communities tends to be really youth determined and really youth specific that they sometimes they need somebody to help to talk to. (National stakeholder)*

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Stakeholders highlighted the role host home programs could play in formalizing these arrangements. For example, a host home program coordinator explained “Whenever we went out to the school districts, there were coaches already doing it. . . . There were teachers already doing it. They were already having youth come and stay with them. We just formalize it, give them support, offer some assistance financially to the host home.” However, stakeholders also mentioned challenges associated with running host home programs, including licensing rules that differ by state and challenges matching youth to hosts. Prevention funding is another way stakeholders reported they support young people in informal arrangements. A stakeholder from a YHDP community also reported that receiving prevention funding allowed their region to start serving youth in informal arrangements.

## Equity & Inclusion

Stakeholders highlighted the heightened challenges to providing equitable and inclusive services in rural areas.

- Two regions indicated they lacked data to **measure disparities** and resources for providing more equitable and inclusive services.
- Young adults reported experiencing **racism** from rural public systems. They noted the criminalization of homelessness for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in particular by rural law enforcement, education, and child welfare systems.
- Stakeholders from **Tribal nations** and other historically **marginalized communities**, reported looking for funding to develop strategies for addressing rural youth and family homelessness. National stakeholders also emphasized the importance of including Tribal stakeholders in regional and national conversations about rural youth homelessness.
- All types of stakeholders acknowledged that rural youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) have limited access to **affirming supports**, and suggested strategies to connect youth with broader LGBTQIA communities and affirming housing and mental health services.

## Measuring Equity & Inclusion

**Stakeholders from two regions reported facing challenges that made it hard to measure progress towards providing more equitable services.** These stakeholders explained that their

state education data did not have all the fields needed to track equity and that this data was inconsistent across rural school districts. One stakeholder said, "We had some [state] Department of Education data that was really good, and some that was completely nonexistent." A stakeholder from a different state said that their Department of Education data did not capture sexual orientation or even race/ethnicity. "Nothing in our data shows students who are LGBTQ, pregnant, what demographic they are in terms of race or color." One of these stakeholders also admitted that they were not tracking race and ethnicity in their homelessness data system since their region was predominantly White:

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*Quite frankly, when we developed the system, we did what we've been doing for a long time, which is something that we need to change, is kind of made this statement of the bulk of our communities are Caucasian, so. . . we don't have robust equity pieces within our protocols, because the way we've thought about it for a long time is that there isn't really a need. But I think we could certainly benefit from better data on our communities in terms of what that need is. . . . We can't use our current system to give us that information. (Regional stakeholder)*

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Stakeholders from these two areas also mentioned doing trainings on different topics to promote equity. One stakeholder noted that they would like to do more trainings in this area, but had not been able to find funding to do so. "This is not something that our funders pay for. They want us to be inclusive and equitable, but they won't pay for us to get specific training on that."

### Racial Equity

**Black and multiracial young adults from two regions described how inequitable schools and the criminalization of homelessness affect BIPOC in rural areas in particular.** These young people explained how police, teachers, child welfare caseworkers, and residential facilities have treated them and other BIPOC unfairly. For example, a young person emphasized that inequitable school experiences can set BIPOC students "back on education and pushes them on the path that they really cannot walk out of especially on their own." She went on to explain how BIPOC are treated differently from White youth, blamed for their situation instead of supported, and disproportionately sent to residential facilities that serve as a pipeline to prison: "I have found that it is more common that White people get the help that they need more often, because systems are more likely to handle them, and believe them, but when a Black student or other students of color come forward, they are less likely to want to help them because they want to blame them for their situation." A young adult from another area also emphasized the lack of police training in rural areas and noted that police harassment can be more targeted in small towns than in big cities.

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*Both the police department and the sheriff's department, they have lack of training, and the way that they talk to the youth down there is just very downright disrespectful. . . . And I wish some type of law enforcement division will do this, is to create a separate wing in the department that had dispatch for mental health counselors because you're sending police officers to issues that don't really need the police, that need mental health counselors, they need someone to talk to. Police officers are not that, and especially in rural communities, they don't get that, they don't get the same training that they would get in places like [bigger cities]. . . . When they get into the rural areas it's a lot different. . . the problems are closer to home and it's easy to target people.*

(Young adult stakeholder)

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This young person also described using activism and protest to draw attention to rural youth homelessness and push for restructuring police departments to incorporate mental health professionals to prevent unnecessary arrests. A regional stakeholder in this same focus group agreed and noted that other places around the country are currently experimenting with this approach.

Undocumented young people are particularly vulnerable to the criminalization of homelessness. However, perhaps due in part to the limitations of our sample, the stakeholders who participated in our focus groups reported knowing little about supporting immigrant youth. Stakeholders from one region explained that the official count of immigrant youth experiencing homelessness had recently declined. The decline was due to increasing fear of deportation as well as recent improvements to infrastructure in immigrant *colonias*—communities that had previously been considered inadequate housing. They also noted that immigrants were particularly vulnerable to eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Tribal Nations

**National stakeholders emphasized the importance of including Tribal stakeholders in conversations about youth homelessness, while individuals working for and with Tribal nations reported looking for funding opportunities to address generational homelessness.** Stakeholders working for and with Tribal nations discussed looking for funding opportunities to formalize supports and adapt youth homelessness strategies to better serve Native American families living in rural areas. One stakeholder explained that her Tribe was starting to engage in regular discussions about this issue, and after conversations with a state stakeholder, they were looking into completing a grant application to hire a homeless liaison to work directly for them.

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*We started having a discussion Tribal wide, starting in January. And it's really picked up some ground, and we're moving quite quickly now, but every discussion has come down to one point. And it's addiction. And so, our first step*

*for us is going to be to hopefully hire a homeless liaison sort of person that will work for the Tribe. And so, instead of just looking at youth homelessness, we're looking at it, as. . . generational homelessness. We're talking about families that, you know, some of the kids are sofa surfing because of their parents' addiction. . . . These families are the families that have burned all their bridges with housing, which means they've been evicted and the unit tested positive for some sort of drug or they were arrested for drugs in those units, and then we don't have any fallbacks for them. (Tribal stakeholder)*

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Stakeholders working directly with and for Tribal nations also highlighted that it was common for families to be doubled up or for youth to be living with extended family. One state stakeholder explained that “a lot of elders had their family members’ extended family members and we have really worked with the Tribes to talk about, ‘Okay, is this a choice or is this due to economic reasons?’” A school district stakeholder explained they were looking for funding to formalize some of these arrangements through a host home program: “We’re really exploring those grant options for host homes and whatnot. Culturally, it just really fits with what our students, you know, their choice, they want to live with family, even if it’s not who they’d consider their biological family. And so, trying to create ways to support those arrangements in a good healthy way.”

National and state stakeholders emphasized the importance of including Tribal nations in conversations about youth homelessness, and noted that these nations are often not represented. A youth homelessness stakeholder serving Native American youth off-reservation also explained that the Indian Health Service was a key resource for serving this population. Additionally, a state stakeholder and a young adult highlighted the lack of resources on reservations in their state and explained how COVID-19 disproportionately impacted a Tribal nation due to lack of running water and crowded housing. They said, “We know one reason coronavirus spread so quickly. . . is that many people live in overcrowded housing without running water. It’s hard to wash your hands if you don’t have running water and it’s also hard to maintain social distancing if your housing is overcrowded.”

### Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation

**Focus group participants raised concerns about youth having to leave their homes due to their sexual orientation or gender identity and not having affirming LGBTQIA services in rural areas.** A regional stakeholder noted that when their Continuum of Care completed a system mapping exercise with service providers from several rural counties, they found that hardly any of the counties had services that were outwardly friendly to LGBTQIA youth, and that some service providers even specified that LGBTQIA youth would not come to them for help. The stakeholder said, “And even went as far as some of our counties said, ‘They just wouldn’t stay here. . . . They would literally leave, especially a trans individual. They would just leave, because they would not be welcome here.’”

Stakeholders from another region explained that almost all the resources for youth experiencing homelessness in their region came from churches that were not welcoming to LGBTQIA youth. A

young person explained that the churches were judgmental, which “gives an uncomfortable feeling because you don’t actually feel wanted and then you go into the whole stressing things, suicide, and that goes into the whole mental health issue part.” This young adult, and another from a different area, both stressed the toll being LGBTQIA in rural areas takes on mental health. They emphasized the importance of developing affirming school-based mental health services for this population in particular.

Stakeholders in two regional focus groups noted that transgender youth experiencing homelessness face additional challenges, including transphobia and lack of access to gender reassignment surgery. For example, a higher education stakeholder in this focus group emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic was putting many transgender youth in danger:

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*In this pandemic when our university closed down, the number of trans students who reached out to me and said, “I am now compelled to live in a home environment that is unsafe,” “I have nowhere to go,” “I’m having to room with someone on campus because my stepfather wants to hurt me. And they are they are, you know, threatening to rape me.” It’s a different kind of an issue and I’m not sure how to address it. (Regional stakeholder)*

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**The strategies that stakeholders discussed for serving LGBTQIA youth included providing affirming housing programs, connecting youth to the larger LGBTQIA community, and providing flexible supports.** A young adult emphasized the importance of carefully vetting prospective hosts to make sure they can provide an affirming environment, after her own experience staying with a stranger informally who turned out to be homophobic. Another young person described how LGBTQIA youth in his region used social media and texting to support each other in the absence of formal services.

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*We had created a texting chain and it has been around for three years. Currently, we have 438 LGBTQIA youth between [two states] on that list, and it’s basically to pass around, send out cash-app money, if they need gas, hotels or things like that. If I need help or someone else needs help, it’s just a line of resources that we use. . . it’s a chain where LGBTQIA youth can find a family. (Young adult stakeholder)*

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As this quote suggests, access to flexible supports like cash can be especially helpful for LGBTQIA youth who are most likely to face discrimination or lack of safety in shelters and residential programs. Stakeholders also recommended expanding urban LGBTQIA organizations to serve or connect with youth in rural areas, providing a shuttle for rural youth to connect with

LGBTQIA community in more urban areas, creating housing units for LGBTQIA youth to live more independently, and researching LGBTQIA service needs.

## Collaboration

Stakeholders raised concerns about barriers that prevented **overburdened nonprofit and government agencies** from collaborating, while those from YHDP regions noted that the community-level funding had helped them establish important relationships.

While regions have made some efforts to seek youth input, they encountered geographic, technological, and funding **barriers to authentic youth collaboration**.

### Agency Collaboration

**Stakeholders reported several barriers to collaboration among the overburdened nonprofits and government agencies that engage with youth experiencing homelessness**, including lack of resources, high turnover, agencies not understanding how their actions complement or impede each other, differences between the McKinney-Vento Education and HUD definitions of homelessness, data sharing challenges, and lack of trust. They highlighted the challenges of working with child welfare and law enforcement agencies in particular. Focus group participants from four regions noted that their child welfare agencies and police departments did not seem to understand available youth homelessness services or how to connect youth with funded independent living opportunities. For example, a stakeholder from a housing program noted that they had been accused by police of harboring minors even though they obtained parental signatures for young people to stay with them. A regional stakeholder explained that having a county-administered child welfare system made it especially challenging to provide youth homelessness services across a multicounty region, since each county had different protocols.

**Focus group participants described different strategies they have used or would like to use to promote a better understanding of youth homelessness and coordinate referral processes among different local and state stakeholders.** They noted that community education about youth homelessness definitions and services could help facilitate collaboration at local, regional, and state levels and across both formal and informal partners. A state stakeholder provided an example of conducting outreach with law enforcement to set up new referral processes:

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*One of the other approaches that we've used with law enforcement, I just wanted to throw out that has actually been very helpful. It can be really hard to get the buy in and that's one of the things that our agency has been able to do and also struggled with doing is doing specific outreach and honestly presentations to law enforcement in the communities where our members are and helping to get a more structured process for referral in place, so kinda getting those MOUs in place with law enforcement. Actually, setting up*



*arrangements where when there's a runaway report and the youth is picked up, providing that information to be used to the family upfront and saying, "Hey, we're gonna provide your information to this agency, so that they can contact you and follow up and see how you're doing." (State stakeholder)*

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Similarly, a juvenile justice stakeholder from a YHDP region described how they had formed a new partnership between courts and service providers to establish a family counseling certificate program. Additionally, a homeless liaison explained how she did a lot of groundwork in reaching out to other stakeholders to explain McKinney-Vento policies for supporting students experiencing homelessness. This helped her collaborate better with Head Start, which provides early education services to the children of young people experiencing homelessness, and other community organizations and individuals. She emphasized how in a rural community everybody can be a potential resource: "In our rural situations, everybody knows somebody, so I can't assume just because they might not have homeless like within their work setting, like something they normally do, that they can't be a resource and help with referring kids or finding resources with kids." Stakeholders in other regions echoed this sentiment and acknowledged the important role that faith communities, libraries, and even laundromats in these areas can play in identifying young people experiencing homelessness and connecting them with services.

**National, state, and regional stakeholders explained how receiving funding at the community or region level can provide resources and incentivize collaboration to improve partnership engagement.** Having community funds that are not tied to a specific agency can help multiple stakeholders come together to work more collaboratively. One national stakeholder highlighted the importance of strategically working together to create sustainable mutually beneficial relationships:

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*I think it is very important in rural communities for partners to realize that the organization they want to partner with may have their own goals, their own paradigms, their own priorities, and their own needs, right? Because a lot of these systems are under resourced. And so, I think any approach to collaboration needs to come from a paradigm if you want to put it that way or sort of a guiding principle of mutual benefit. Not just viewing the other system solely as an extension of your own system, but how can, what can I do? I would like to ask you to help me with XYZ, but what am I prepared to give in return in partnership to support you? (National stakeholder)*

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Stakeholders from regions that received YHDP funding emphasized how much that funding in particular helped them form important new partnerships and leverage resources. It also helped bring their Continuum of Care on board. A regional stakeholder shared how the YHDP funding helped agencies learn more about each other, which in turn helped facilitate their collaboration:

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*Over the last year that we've talked about, just by learning, learning about each other, and I understand so much more of the pressures that children's services is going through, juvenile courts are going through. . . . Just by these resources allowing that dialogue, you know, just learning those pressures, and so it's kinda, breaking down that "us and them" kind of deal that, you know, and I've been greatly appreciative of that. (Regional stakeholder)*

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These focus group participants from YHDP regions also highlighted their ability to develop strong relationships—and even friendships—with stakeholders from other agencies specifically due to being in a rural region where a small number of people are engaged in this work.

**While stakeholders reported that federal funding to some communities has facilitated collaboration, these funding opportunities are not accessible to the most marginalized communities.** A regional focus group participant shared that the process for obtaining the funding was extremely burdensome, especially due to the lack of data on youth homelessness their rural region had at the time. She explained, “The federal process is a hoop jumping situation and so there has to be people who can deal with the administrative burden and provide the staffing, and the support to operationalize that.” For less-resourced communities, this can be a huge barrier that exacerbates existing inequities. Some regions need resources just to get the conversation about youth homelessness started. A young adult from a marginalized community explained, “We need to build a table before anybody can sit at the table. I don’t really think there’s the actual table that’s really focusing on homeless youth within rural areas for [our] county or surrounding counties.”

**While stakeholders reported that COVID-19 has highly exacerbated problems for youth experiencing homelessness and made it more challenging to serve this population, they also pointed out some ways the pandemic has actually aided collaboration efforts.** For example, they noted that the heightened concern around youth homelessness in the context of the pandemic has helped to bring child welfare agencies and institutions of higher education to the table and helped partners become more proficient in videoconferencing. For example, a higher education stakeholder explained how COVID-19 made the relationship between youth homelessness and student recruitment and retention more obvious to universities.

### Youth Collaboration

Stakeholders explained that youth voices can be especially devalued in rural communities. However, they recognized the importance of youth collaboration. They also reported encountering many challenges that prevented them from engaging rural youth authentically and consultatively. Among the challenges they reported were tokenization, lack of resources, dispersed youth populations, technological needs, and inequitable youth representation.

**Four stakeholders emphasized the devaluation of youth voice by rural communities and agencies.** These stakeholders (which included three young people and one national stakeholder) believed there needs to be a “cultural shift” for rural organizations to be able to engage youth authentically in decision-making processes. For example, a young person

explained that in “smaller towns. . . most of the people really don’t wanna listen to young people because they think that young people really don’t know anything.” This stakeholder also highlighted the exclusion of marginalized youth in rural communities from regional- or state-level youth consultation opportunities and the “need to make sure that we’re focusing on minority youth more than the ones that are already at the table because they are fine and they’re normally in bigger cities.” Other young adults explained how rural child welfare caseworkers and school staff showed them they did not value their youth perspectives.

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*Just having dealt with [CPS], like officers and stuff and caseworkers and like watching other at-risk youth deal with them, they don’t listen to us. They wait until they can contact any type of next of kin. They don’t, they don’t care who it is. They can literally call someone you met once in your childhood and they will take their word over yours, and it’s really frustrating because even if you tell them time and time again, like that’s not a safe place that’s not somewhere you should be. They’re just like, “Well the way time works, and the way that this is gonna work, you’re going to go there anyway,” and it just ends up putting a lot of people back in unsafe situations. And they just like don’t really care, because they’re not going to see you again, because they’re not going to be your same case manager. (Young adult stakeholder)*

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**Across different regions, stakeholders detailed various organizational activities designed to center or include youth voice.** Stakeholders reported youth engagement on the regional and local levels with activities ranging from feedback surveys to youth action/advisory boards (YABs; focus group participants seemed to use these terms interchangeably).

Stakeholders from three regions emphasized the importance of an authentic consultative relationship and described how YAB participation, when done well, could support youth and their career development. In this context, a consultative relationship means that youth are treated as experts on their experiences with youth homelessness and included in decision-making processes. For example, a national stakeholder described an experience where her involvement in a community was conditional on approval by their YAB. Additionally, a regional stakeholder from a Continuum of Care (CoC) that served both urban and rural communities explained, “We have really great, active members on that [YAB] that are learning a lot, and then they are really integrated into all levels of the CoC, so we have two members that serve on our board that have voting powers.”

A national stakeholder noted that “a lot of young people [who] have lived experience, end up wanting to be social workers, and [want to] be service providers and help other people that have been through similar experiences.” Echoing this sentiment, stakeholders across different regions suggested a number of ways in which youth collaboration could help set young people up for future success, such as by connecting YAB members with CoC mentors. A young person suggested, “Give youth ownership because that’s one thing that we’re lacking is ownership, we

can't learn independence without ownership and when I talk about ownership, I mean actually being at the table with decision makers and making decisions." Participants from four focus groups also acknowledged the challenge of setting up committees in a way that youth are not tokenized.

**Stakeholders across the regions described geographic, technological, and funding challenges to collaborating with youth in rural communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.** Three stakeholders noted that youth can be hours apart from each other in rural areas with poor internet connectivity and cell phone service. Service providers do not have all the technology needed to support collaboration in this context. To address these barriers, stakeholders from one region were setting up separate local YABs directly connected to specific service providers or schools in a couple of towns throughout the region. Stakeholders were looking for funding to get tablets or laptops for participating youth. Stakeholders reported a need for additional funds to support and implement meaningful youth collaboration. A stakeholder from an YHDP community explained:

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*We have to have the money to reimburse and compensate the young people in an intentional way. We need to have the money to fully employ a staff person or a handful of staff people to actually do it and none of the robust services that we have right now really have the capacity, space, or it's not even allowable to do that. . . . We really need funding and dedicated paid people to specifically do that work, otherwise it just always falls to the wayside. (Regional stakeholder)*

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This sentiment was shared across the regions, with stakeholders highlighting the lack of funds that could be used for kick-starting and supporting these programs or other efforts to facilitate youth consultation.

## DISCUSSION

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### Implications & Recommendations

#### Identifying Youth at Risk for or Experiencing Homelessness

The lack of resources to address youth homelessness in many rural areas serves as a perverse incentive for identifying youth who need supports or services. This prevents rural areas that require additional services from being able to demonstrate or quantify that need. As long as funding for youth homelessness services relies on data that rural areas are not able to accurately capture through PIT counts, and on education data on student homelessness status, youth will not be adequately served. Funding to support innovative and alternative methods for estimating prevalence is essential for serving these areas. Policymakers will need to ensure funding is provided to rural communities that support the development of innovative strategies focused on improving prevention and response supports and services. Creative approaches could include refining and supplementing current methods by engaging public systems and

community-based organizations, and by employing universal screening, administrative data linkages, and representative surveys.

Community education to raise awareness about youth homelessness and clarify definitions is crucial to get more community members on board to help with identifying, referring, and supporting young people. This can also reduce the stigma associated with youth homelessness and help youth experiencing homelessness to recognize their own situation.

In some cases, federally required school-based homelessness liaisons may already be well situated to provide this community education. However, in other regions, trainings from state or federal bodies may be needed to help bring school leaders, homelessness liaisons, and other school staff on board, recognize their responsibilities, and allocate sufficient time and resources to addressing youth homelessness. Increasing the capacity of school counselors and homelessness liaisons by funding trainings and providing additional staff time to devote to youth homelessness will help them develop the trusting relationships with students. Liaisons need these relationships in order to reach more young people who are falling through the cracks. Schools should also be equipped with mental health services to support the needs of their students in an accessible way.

### **Recommendations**

1. Support the use of alternative methods to more accurately estimate rural youth homelessness populations.
2. Increase the capacity of rural schools to identify youth and raise awareness by funding trainings and devoting additional staff time to youth homelessness.

### **Providing Services & Supports**

The landscape of rural youth homeless services is evolving. While some stakeholders reported an increasing presence of services, there is still a long way to go, with some areas severely lacking youth-oriented and trauma-informed services and supports, especially for unaccompanied minors.

Due to the high cost per youth of serving geographically dispersed youth in rural regions, rural areas cannot compete with urban areas for the same funding opportunities. To reach these remote and dispersed populations will require mandating and funding the presence of youth-oriented services in every U.S. community, regardless of size, at a federal level. Grants must be flexible enough to allow for a variety of housing, mental health, addiction, systems navigation, career, and youth development resources to support youth with differing needs. Flexible grants would also allow for significant spending on transportation and technology to keep youth connected. Funding should be flexible to allow for different types of services and supports to meet different needs.

Addressing rural youth homelessness effectively will require funding and rigorously evaluating innovative programs to build an evidence base for rural contexts. Improving existing housing and infrastructure in rural areas to meet HUD standards could help increase young adult access to affordable housing. Increasing the presence of youth-oriented shelter and housing programs (including emergency shelters, rapid rehousing, transitional housing, college dorms, and permanent supportive housing), mental health and addiction services, drop-in centers, system

navigation services, and career and youth development programs could also help young people exit homelessness.

Flexible financial and housing resources could also help better serve youth in informal housing arrangements. For example, funding for homelessness prevention, host home programs, vouchers, and direct payments to youth could help rural regions support these young people. Active school-based homelessness liaisons or system navigation coaches could help youth and the individuals providing informal housing arrangements connect with more resources. Additionally, some states have laws that prohibit minors from staying with people who are not their legal guardians, which can make formalizing these arrangements challenging. Changing these state laws and providing legal guidance to youth and their supporters could help states avoid pushing youth underground and criminalizing their situation.

### **Recommendations**

1. Provide all communities with flexible funding to ensure that youth in every part of the country have access to coordinated services and supports.
2. Support the development and evaluation of innovative programs for supporting rural youth.
3. Provide guidance to help youth and their informal supporters engage in safe, legal, and supportive relationships.
4. Rewrite state laws to help formalize arrangements, such as by allowing unaccompanied minors to consent to their own shelter.

### **Equity & Inclusion**

Increasing the ability of rural areas to collect data on youth race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, parenting status, and other characteristics will help them monitor service delivery and measure progress towards greater equity and inclusivity.

Other strategies for reducing racial inequity in rural areas include advocating for more equitable school funding and for the dismantling of racist systems that criminalize homelessness among BIPOC youth. Decriminalizing youth homelessness in rural areas will require significant efforts, and could include changing laws and policies, increasing the presence of youth homelessness services and supports, and training child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and law enforcement staff.

Strategies for reaching historically marginalized and low-resourced communities include federally requiring and funding youth-oriented youth homelessness services in every community, as well as providing funding for marginalized and low-resourced communities to work on proposals for larger grants. We must make intentional and explicit efforts to include and fund the participation of these communities and Tribal nations in conversations about addressing rural youth homelessness, and fund community-driven efforts to build their own tables for addressing the issue locally.

There is a need for more affirming services and supports for LGBTQIA youth in rural communities, and for transgender youth in particular, who face heightened adversity and discrimination in rural communities. Urban LGBTQIA organizations and mutual aid efforts could also reach youth in rural areas by providing shuttles or offering internet- or text-based supports.

Until more housing programs in rural areas are more outwardly accepting and affirming of LGBTQIA identities, flexible solutions like direct cash transfers could empower LGBTQIA youth to access their own solutions where they feel most safe. Well-vetted affirming host homes may also help serve this population in some communities. BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and immigrant youth have been especially vulnerable to COVID-19 and its consequences, and rural communities will need to explore innovative and flexible strategies for addressing this.

**Recommendations:**

1. Explicitly fund strategies to dismantle systemic racism in rural public systems, and better measure equity and inclusion.
2. Fund the participation of Tribal nations and marginalized communities in rural youth homelessness conversations.
3. Fund LGBTQIA-affirming housing programs, mental health services, and flexible supports in rural areas and connect youth to broader LGBTQIA communities.

**Collaboration**

Rural communities need support in aligning agendas across multiple systems and developing structured cross-system referral and identification processes. Funding streams that target rural communities as a whole (such as YHDP), as opposed to a specific agency or program, can help facilitate these collaborative relationships. Agencies and programs must learn more about each other to understand how they complement or impede each other's work. This can be done through presentations, conferences, or other means. Stakeholders noted that child welfare and law enforcement agencies in particular were too overburdened to simultaneously serve unaccompanied minors adequately and respectfully and to engage in conversations about youth homelessness. This suggests a need for system change. Building a network and learning community of rural youth homelessness stakeholders across regions could also help service providers and policymakers support each other to resolve emerging challenges.

While focus group participants said they valued the need for youth collaboration, most indicated they were struggling with engaging youth authentically and consultatively. To transform the landscape of youth homelessness services so it is more responsive to youth needs, rural areas need guidance and resources to develop, build, and maintain influential youth action boards. Funding should cover the labor required to establish and maintain YABs as well as respectable wages or stipends to pay youth board members. Regional and state-level youth action boards that represent both urban and rural areas should also ensure they have representation from rural and historically marginalized communities. YAB funding must take rural technology and transportation needs into account so that youth have all the necessary provisions to participate meaningfully.

**Recommendations:**

1. Target funding to communities, as opposed to individual agencies, to support the development of community-driven collaborative approaches
2. Require and provide explicit funding and effective technical assistance to develop rural youth action boards (YABs) with meaningful roles and influence and ensure rural areas are represented on regional and state YABs.

## Strengths & Limitations

This report covers an expansive breadth of challenges and strategies, which comes at the sacrifice of depth into any particular area. The study relies on a small sample from five rural regions. These regions represent a great deal of variation in level of services and demographic characteristics. This gives us a sense of the broadness of the range of challenges facing rural communities and strategies used to address these challenges. However, while these regions were selected with the intention of maximizing variation, they are not representative of all rural areas in the U.S. The number and types of stakeholders who participated varied considerably from region to region. We had hoped to have participation from law enforcement as well as more child welfare and juvenile justice stakeholders, which would have provided additional perspectives. Instead, the majority of our focus group participants were from youth homelessness organizations and education.

After we obtained IRB approval, but before we completed our focus groups, the COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States. This likely made it more challenging for many young adults and other stakeholders to participate, and may have biased our sample towards youth who are better supported and more technologically savvy. However, this also allowed us to discuss the ways in which COVID-19 was influencing rural responses to youth homelessness.

## Future Research

This study highlights the need for additional research and evaluation in several areas. For example, studies could explore the ways rural communities are leveraging informal networks or developing collaborative and flexible systems to support young people's diverse needs. Critically, we lack evaluative evidence about the effectiveness and implementation of youth homelessness programs and related services in rural contexts (Morton et al., 2019). For example, new research assessing the effectiveness and implementation of rural host home programs or evaluating promising models for implementing youth action boards could address that gap and contribute to designing the future landscape of rural youth homelessness programs in the U.S.



# GLOSSARY

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**Continuum of Care (CoC):** A regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals.

**Couch surfing:** Moving from one temporary living arrangement to another without a secure place to live. While some definitions consider staying with others as homelessness, others place this under a broader concept of “housing instability.” We include couch surfing in overall estimates of homelessness but also provide estimates that separate out couch surfing-only experiences where people did not also report “homelessness.”

**Homelessness:** Generally refers to experiences of sleeping in places not meant for living, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others (“couch surfing”) while lacking a safe and stable alternative living arrangement. Unaccompanied homelessness means the youth is unaccompanied by a parent or guardian while homeless.

**McKinney-Vento Act:** A federal law that ensures the right of students to go to school even when they are homeless or do not have a permanent address.

**Rural communities:** There is no single, widely accepted definition of a rural community. Different surveys, agencies, policies, and programs classify areas as rural based on a range of characteristics, such as population size, population density, household density, resident interpretations, and the presence of (or distance from) metropolitan areas. The term can be used to refer to small towns or to large rural parts of a state. In this report, we often use this term to refer to large geographic regions within a state that have the potential for collaboration around youth homelessness prevention and response, such as the regions covered by a CoC. To select rural communities to participate in this study, we used the YHDP Round 3 definition of *rural*, which specifies that a region is rural if the population is “more rural than suburban or urban” (HUD, 2018, p. 4). This allowed us to use the [FY2018 YHDP Rural Area Worksheet](#) to determine eligibility for a specific county or set of counties.

**Youth:** Varying age ranges are used for youth throughout the world. The most common range internationally is 15–24. We use the age range of 13–25 to align with the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act age range for national estimates, but we refer to two specific subgroups: adolescent minors (ages 13–17) and young adults (18–25).

**Youth Action Board (YAB):** HUD defines a YHDP YAB as: “A group of at least 3 youth included in policy-making decisions of the CoC, particularly on policies that relate to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Each YAB member must be age 24 or younger, and at least two-thirds of the YAB members must be homeless or formerly homeless. The Youth Action Board must have full membership in the CoC or be a formal committee within the CoC,” (HUD, 2018, p. 4). Focus group participants used the term more broadly and interchangeably with “youth advisory board.”

**Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP):** This HUD initiative awards funding and technical assistance to communities on a competitive basis to develop and implement coordinated plans to reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness.

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